Dark Tragedies of the Congo Unknown to the World

Country Founded in Benevolence, Given Over to Plunder and Oppression of the Natives.

Land That Was to Be Open to the Commerce of the World Seized and Operated as a Monopoly.

BEFORE the bar of public opinion throughout the civilized world Belgium stands arraigned for nameless atrocities committed upon the natives of the Congo Free State, over which Leopold, King of the Belgians, wields undisputed and practically despotic sway. Whatever may be said or thought of the truth of the charges of cruelty and oppression, the attitude of Belgium in this strangely constituted government—the product of an alleged benevolent regard for the welfare of the natives and the progress of civilization—is certainly anomalous and probably without the sustaining force of legal right.

When the Congo Free State came into being in 1885, as the result of the conference of world powers held at Berlin, it was heralded as a triumph of beneficence, and it was supposed and freely promised that the arid civilization of southern Africa, tended and nurtured by the solicitude of the powers, would bloom and blossom as the rose. Never has the white man's burden been taken up with such entire enthusiasm; never, it may be added, has it been borne with more of profit to the shrewd philanthropist. The white man in the Congo Free State may be bearing the white man's burden—indeed, we have his untarnished word that he is—but the luckless wight of darker hue is bearing the white man and the burden also. Nobody seems to entertain much doubt about that.

The cruelties said to have been practiced by the representatives of the Belgian government and their native allies make up, though, another story. If it be true, barbarism had something to learn of modern civilization, even along the lines in which barbarism excelled. Brutality, slavery in its worse aspects, mutilation, the murder of the innocent, the destruction of whole villages—these are some of the charges that are preferred and that have been substantiated by the direct testimony, purporting to reflect truthfully the impressions of personal experience, of many observers.

Responsibility Indicated.

The charges are circumstantial; names, dates, and places are given; responsibility is at least indicated. The governments of Great Britain and the United States have been earnestly besought to investigate the situation through the agency of some impartial tribunal. Belgium has professed herself entirely willing that such an investigation should be made, but nothing has yet been done.

The appeal for governmental investigation of the alleged atrocities was made in this country by the conference of missionary societies which assembled in Washington last April. In a lengthy document presented to the Senate and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations the charges are set forth at length and specific instances of cruelty and oppression are cited to sustain them.

That this country is entitled to know the truth concerning the administration of affairs in the Congo Free State is declared to result from the part it took in the launching of that country upon the sea of nations, and its oft-repeated professions that its participation in the ceremony was not formal or perfunctory merely, but in line with and expressive of its sympathy with the "restless, ardent sentiment which seeks to extend civilizing influences among the dark races and to brighten up with the flow of civilization the dark places of sad-browed Africa."

The quotation is from an address delivered by the late Sir Henry M. Stanley. It is characteristic of the glowing hopes of the men and women who presided over the birth of this new state and in violent contrast with the commentaries of those who are now engaged in disinterested work among its great and helpless population.

The government known as the Independent State of the Congo was unique in its origin. It came into being by an act of an assembly representing all the nations of the Western World. In the original movement looking toward the creation of this government, Leopold, King of the Belgians, bore a leading part, and it was he who invited the conference to assemble at Berlin in 1885. A company of geographers, travelers, and philanthropists, representing a number of European countries, had been called together by him in September, 1876.

The First Organization.

By this conference an organization known as the International African Association was constituted. A few years later a society was organized for a purpose described by one of its members as that of "studying what might be made of the Congo River and its basin." This society, including at first representatives of several European countries of prominence in the commercial and monetary world, soon came almost exclusively under Belgian control. Having the same officers with the original international association, it soon practically superceded that organization, and, though in no true sense international, it renamed itself the International Association of the Congo.

After some years spent in visits of exploration to the Congo State the association reported that it had entered into treaty relations with more than 450 chiefs of the Congo territory, and sought recognition as a quasi-political power. Other plans found favor with certain European powers. A treaty was tentatively concluded between England and Portugal, involving large recognition of the rights of the latter country in western Africa. Representatives of the international association appealed strongly to our own Government in the interval of opposition to this treaty, and to other form of agreement unsatisfactory to the association. As a result of this appeal, after favorable recommendation by President Arthur, the United States Government on April 22, 1884, granted recognition to the association in the following terms:

"In harmony with the traditional policy of the United States, which enjoins a proper regard for the commercial interests of their citizens, while at the same time avoiding interference with controversies between other powers, as well as alliances with other nations, the Government of the United States announces its sympathy with and approval of the humane and benevolent purposes of the International Association of Congo, administering, as it does, the interests of the free states there established, and will order the officers of the United States, both on land and sea, to recognize the flag of the international association as the flag of a friendly government."

This action, taken at this critical juncture, proved determinative of the issue presented in the claims preferred by the international association. The government of Germany soon assumed a favorable attitude. The Anglo-Portuguese treaty was withdrawn. Conventions were made with the association of Great Britain and other powers. Meanwhile a conference, in which fourteen states were represented, including the American Government, was convened at Berlin, as a result of which in January, 1885, definite sanction was given to the establishment of a free state in the basin of the Congo, and principles regulative of its powers were adopted. Six months later, on the 1st of August, 1885, the association adopted formally the new title of the Independent State of the Congo. Thus a new state, of which Leopold II was recognized as sovereign and sole administrator, was constituted. Such is the remarkable story of the way by which an individual attained to power, unlimited by internal legislative or judicial restraint, over a territory four times as great as that of France or the German empire.

Territory and People.

The Independent State of the Congo includes a territory upward of a million square miles in extent. Having a frontage of about 400 miles upon the Atlantic coast, it broadens vastly in the interior, comprising nearly all the basin of the Congo River. This great river, second only to the Amazon in the volume of its waters, with innumerable tributary streams, both enriches the land and affords access to all sections of the great area.

The climate in the coast district is unfavorable for protracted residence, but the elevated plateaus of the interior districts offer an attractive temperature and conditions in general favorable to health. Grazing for cattle is found on the grassy plains, and the timber lands, when cleared, proved at once reasonably fertile, producing the vegetables common in our markets, while the forests abound in tropical fruits. The most valuable product of the forest is supplied by the india rubber vine, the Independent State of the Congo leading all other sections of the earth in its supply of this commercial product. It is evident that the resources of the country, rightly conserved and developed, would secure for it wealth indefinitely great and a corresponding position in the world's commerce.

The native peoples, of many tribes and languages, are variously estimated as numbering between 20,000,000 and 30,000,000. The earliest white visitors to the country give pleasant testimony to the traits of native character. As a rule they were welcomed and found the people ready to receive instruction. In certain sections considerable progress had been made in the development of the arts. Doctor Hinde, for example, who accompanied the expedition of Baron Dhanis for the overthrow of the Arab slave power, speaks of his surprise in finding "masons, brickmakers, agriculturists, and ironworkers." Independence, alertness of mind, curiosity, and readiness to adopt new customs are noted by travelers as characteristics of the people. In no country has missionary work found a people more hospitable or more responsive.

A Breach of Contract.

The government of the Independent State of the Congo undeniably has followed a course which involves apparently a central breach of faith with the powers creating it and with the native people whom it was appointed to serve. The root of administrative evils in the government of the Independent State of the Congo is in its monopolization of the territory and the resources of the state.

The astonishing claim leading to this action is now traceable in a document issued July 1, 1885, which at the time was supposed to be dictated by concern for the rights of the natives. It declared that "no one may dispossess any native of lands occupied by him," adding that "all vacant land is considered as belonging to the state." Later, through successive public edicts, it became clear that the term "vacant" was to be interpreted as meaning all territory in the state with the exception of the sites of the native villages and the gardens of such villages. Thus was consummated, without offer of compensation to the natives, this appropriation by the government of all the vast Congo territory save the little areas occupied by villages and gardens.

Certain monopolist companies have been created, in which the King has controlling financial interest, either through ownership of a majority of the stock or through demands upon the revenues; but more than 800,000 acres are set apart as belonging to the "domaine prive" of the King. Forest and plain, hill and valley, the river and its affluents, are his private possession.

And the claim applies not simply to the territory, but all products of this immense region, native or developed by cultivation, are claimed as the King's personal property, even the produce of the gardens. The natives may not trade in these products; they may only bring them to the King's agents for such compensation as the agents choose to allow.

The relation of these extraordinary claims to the evils from which the land is suffering is easily traced. The products of the country must be collected by the natives, and all true motive for industry having been destroyed, no resort remains but that of compulsion. A body of armed men is required for enforcement of the King's will. This body must be secured through raids upon the native tribes, and the more savage tribes are chosen by preference. The captives are taken far from their homes, and after a time of restraint are commissioned for the appointed service. This "force publique" in 1896 was a force of 8,500 men; six years later it had more than doubled in numbers. In addition to this native force, the monopolist companies are allowed to raise auxiliary forces, and savage tribes are made the allies of the state for prosecution of the same ends. This force as a whole is now believed to comprise a body of 30,000 men.

The character of the work of these men is indicated in the words of M. Edouard Pickard, a member of the Belgian senate: "Their ferocity equals that of a pack of hounds hunting their quarry." Unrestrained by natural sentiments of compassion, held severely responsible for securing at any cost the appointed tributes from the people, officered by men incited to their task by promise of "bounties proportionate to the results obtained," these barbaric hordes are let loose upon the people. Their representative in the villages is "the sentry," whose work is to secure the appointed levy of rubber or other products, and who is practically without restraint upon his savage propensities. He is described by one visitor to the country as a "dare-devil aboriginal armed with a rifle, his power limited only by such repression as the government chooses to use." It was of these men Mr. Glave wrote:

"The black soldiers are bent on fighting and raiding; they want no peaceful settlement. They have good rifles and ammunition, realize their superiority over the natives with their bows and arrows, and they want to shoot and kill and rob * * * whether the victim be man, woman, or child, and no matter how defenseless."

Agents Are Helpless.

It should be borne in mind that the subordinate agents of government, if continuing in its service, are made practically helpless. Receiving instruction to furnish a given number of soldiers and a certain amount of rubber, with the understanding that they must employ whatever means are necessary, they know of no methods adequate for the end except those involving appeal to fear. Mr. Glave says that most white officers are averse to the india rubber regime of the state, but the laws command it. It would be unjust not to recognize that the conditions prevailing have aroused distress in men connected with the government, yet it is to be feared that it is only a few of these who have the interest of the people at heart, and these are powerless to stem the tide of oppression. The punishment of subordinates, whether soldiers or white officers, even if honestly attempted, would not reach the evil. The fault is not their primarily. It belongs to the system and to the authority responsible for the establishment and enforcement of that system. Proofs of individual guilt become of secondary consequence as compared with the question as to the essential character and the certain results of the system which the government of the state has ordained.

Concession of right implicitly involves an admission of obligation. The great treaty powers have continuing rights as supervisors and directors in the enterprise conducted by the King. The King is their trustee, to execute the powers conferred by the treaty, and is answerable to them for the use of the powers intrusted to him. Is it too much to say that the great powers of the west are under obligation to communicate with the ruler of the Independent State of the Congo concerning the statements relating to his rule, apparently supported, and to take such measures as will guarantee to these unhappy people the rights established for them in the treaty of Berlin? This right and responsibility belonging to other nations will be recognized as belonging to our own American Government.

Charges Tax Credulity.

The charges that have been made, almost incomprehensibly horrible as some of them are, have been made by reputable and responsible men. They are met with denials, but they are followed by charges of like character, in undiminished number and horror.

It is not well to accept implicitly statements which, if true, cast the blight of a hideous dishonor upon a sovereign king and a sovereign state, but certainly it is not well either to disregard them, or suffer them to pass unchallenged. Neither will a perfunctory denial answer the purpose.

"Within my own knowledge," writes the Rev. E. B. Sjoblon, "forty-five villages were altogether burned down. I passed through twenty-eight abandoned villages. The natives had left their places to go farther inland. In order to separate themselves from the white men they go part of the way down the river, or else they cross the river into French territory. Sometimes the natives are obliged to pay a large indemnity. The chiefs often have to pay with brass wire and slaves, and if the slaves do not make up the amount their wives are sold to pay. I was told that by a Belgian officer. Native sentinels—who, of course, are the sentries referred to by Consul Pickersgill—are placed in the villages. The sentinels see that the other natives work. They are forced to build large houses for these sentinels, and have to leave their places and try to find other places farther away. The sentinels themselves have told me this. I have been in the towns and seen it myself. In the morning the sentinels will go to and fro in the towns to see that no man stays behind. Only a few slaves are allowed to stay at home besides the women and children. Often they say that they have been told by a commissary that if they saw a man staying behind in the village they must shoot him.

"I will give you an instance of a man I saw shot right before my eyes. In one of my inland journeys, when I had gone a little farther, perhaps, than the commissary expected me to go, I saw something that perhaps he would not have liked me to see. It was at a town called Ibera, one of the cannibal towns to which no white man had ever been before. I reached it at sunset after the natives had returned from the various places in which they had been looking for india rubber. They gathered together in a great crowd, being curious to see a white man. Besides, they had heard I had some good news to tell them, which came through the gospel.

Murder and Mutilation.

"When that large crowd gathered and I was just ready to preach, the sentinels rushed in among them to seize an old man. They dragged him aside a little from the crowd and the sentinel in charge came to me and said: 'I want to shoot this man, because he has been in the river fishing today. He has not been on the river for india rubber.' I told him, 'I have not authority to stop you, because I have nothing to do with these palavers, but the people are here to hear what I have to say to them, and I don't want you to do it before my eyes.' He said, 'All right; I will keep him in bounds, then, until tomorrow morning, when you have gone; then I will kill him.' But a few minutes afterward the sentinel came in a rage to the man and shot him right before my eyes. Then he charged his rifle again and pointed it at the others, who all rushed away like chaff before the wind. He told a little boy 8 or 9 years of age to go and cut off the right hand of the man who had been shot. The man was not quite dead, and when he felt the knife he tried to drag his hand away. The boy, after some labor, cut the hand off and laid it by a fallen tree. A little later this hand was put on a fire to smoke before being sent to the commissary.

"All except the old chiefs, etc., are forced to go away and work rubber. It is very difficult for the natives to get it. It has been difficult from the very beginning. They have to wade in marshes. I have seen them often when they passed. They have knives in their hands, and they cut until the sap drops, drop by drop, and they stand in the water. It is difficult for them to work close to their own towns, but as they have to bring a large amount they have to cut the trees constantly until they dry up. Then they go to another place, and by and by they will have to go still farther inland, where the state is not yet fighting the natives, and they have to stay away many days at a time.

"The sentinel told me that the natives there are not able to carry any food with them, and it often happens that they stay away for days at a time and that they die in the marshes of fainting and starvation. The sentinels are from the wildest tribes. They were wild already, but when they get to this work they are many times worse. They are really small kings in the towns, and they often kill the people for the sake of india rubber. They often rob, and steal, and plunder, and take whatever they can get hold of. At the beginning, when I saw that I told the commissary about it, but he turned in anger on me and, in the presence of the soldiers, said that he would expel me from the town if I meddled with matters of that kind any more.

Death Tax for Laziness.

"If the rubber does not reach the full amount required, the sentinels attack the natives. They kill some and bring the hands to the commissary. Others are brought to the commissary as prisoners. Hundreds are constantly taken down in large steamers. Lying in the steamers there are the dead bodies of prisoners who are being taken down to the coast. At the beginning they came with their smoked hands. The sentinels, or else the boys in attendance on them, put these hands on a little kiln, and after they had been smoked, they by and by put them on the top of the rubber baskets. I have on many occasions seen this done.

"At one time I went to an inland lake several miles wide. The natives told me I was the first white man who had ever seen it. Under the shadows of palms and plantain I saw the villages. I saw somebody coming alone and looking at what was going on. As he met me, he said, 'What am I to do? The rubber does not reach a large amount; some of the people have run away, and those who are left refuse to bring the full amount.' And then he told me the amount these people had to bring. The commissaries lower down the river do not know how many people there are in a village. They put on a small village as large an amount as on a big village. In this case it was impossible for the people to collect the required amount.

"From this village I went on to another, where I met a man who pointed to a basket and said to me, 'Look. I have only two hands.' He meant there were not enough to make up for the rubber he had not brought. He had several prisoners tied to the trees. They were waiting to be taken away. When I came back some of the villages were in an uproar. The people were leaving their homes and rushing to the forest. When I reached the river I turned round and saw that the people had large hammocks, in which they were gathering the rubber to be taken to the commissary. I also saw smoked hands, and the prisoners waiting to be taken down to the commissary.

"That is only one of the places in which these practices occur. There is a small island in a stream at Lake Mantumba. The people had not been able to bring the full amount of rubber. The officers with some soldiers went along there. Several of the natives were killed. I saw the dead bodies floating on the lake with the right hands off, and the officer told me when I came back why they had been killed. It was for the rubber. In fact, the officers have always freely told me about the many who were killed, and always in connection with india rubber. In one village which I passed through I saw two or three men on the wayside quite recently killed—about an hour before. The sentinel who had to oversee the gathering of the rubber told me they had killed the men because they had not brought the rubber. When I crossed the stream I saw some dead bodies hanging down from branches in the water. As I turned my face away at the horrible sight, one of the native corporals who was following us down said, 'Oh, that is nothing; a few days ago I returned from a fight, and I brought the white man 160 hands, and they are thrown in the river.'

"At Lake Mantumba later on, in 1895, the natives, after they had begun to get india rubber close to the lake, found hostile tribes with poisoned arrows. The natives could not get far enough for their india rubber. Two or three days after a fight a dead mother was found with two of her children. The mother was shot and the right hand was taken off. On one side was the elder child, also shot, and the right hand also taken off. On the other side was the younger child, with the right hand cut off; but the child, still living, was resting against the dead mother's breast. The dark picture was seen by four other missionaries. I myself saw the child. The natives had begun to cut off the left hand, but seeing their mistake, they left it and cut off the right hand instead."

Cannibals Are Employed.

One of the most scathing denunciations of affairs in the Congo is made in a communication from the Rev. W. M. Morrison, an American Presbyterian minister and missionary, to the British foreign office. He says:

"In the months of August and September of the year 1899 occurred, about three days from Luebo, one of the most shameful affairs that has come within my knowledge. By way of explanation it is necessary to say that at the state post of Luluaburg, which is about five days' march from Luebo, is located a large village of people called Zappo-Zapps.

"They are cannibals, and were brought from far to the east and settled there by a state officer named Paul Le Marinel about the year 1890. Ever since their coming to Luluaburg they have been a terror to the whole surrounding district. In fact, having guns and being known to be cannibals and very brave warriors, they have all these years been the great slave dealers and slave raiders of the district. Perhaps half of the 7,000 or 8,000 people at Luebo who have been or are now slaves have been caught by the Zappo-Zapps in their numerous raids. Quite a large number have been caught by the soldiers, while a goodly number have been seized by the famous state "friendly" at Lusambo, named Penia Mutambo.

"Some few have been caught in petty fights between villagers. The state must of necessity know of the many thousands of slaves who have passed and are now passing through the hands of these Zappo-Zapps. The only possible explanation is that the state and the Zappo-Zapps, many of whom, by the way, are my personal friends, are in alliance in the matter. Up to the time I left Luebo slaves caught in the regions to the east of Luluaburg and Lusambo are almost daily exposed for sale, and always by the Zappo-Zapps. Either the latter themselves have done the raiding or it has been done by some of the 'sepoys' about Lusambo, who have then sold the slaves to the Zappo-Zapps.

"This digression from the incident which I am proceeding to narrate was necessary in order to more fully explain who the Zappo-Zapps are and what is their relation to the state. The circumstances, briefly stated, are these:

Chiefs Were Butchered.

"During the last days of July, 1899 (or about that time), news reached us at Luebo that a large band of Zappo-Zapps, under a famous warrior chief named Mlumba Nkusa, was proceeding into the Bena Pianga country, not far from one of our mission stations, in order to collect tribute and get stores for the state. Upon hearing this news I wrote at once to our missionary at Ibanj, the Rev. W. H. Sheppard, F. R. G. S., warning him to be on the lookout for trouble. He had not long to wait, for soon the news began to come in from the region only one day from the station that the Zappo-Zapps had established themselves in a strong stockade near a village named Chinyama, from which they were almost daily sallying forth to catch slaves, demand tribute from villagers, and kill all who dared oppose them. This condition of affairs went on uninterrupted by the officer at Luluaburg, though only four, or at the most five, days distant. The greatest terror prevailed throughout the whole region, extending even as far as Luebo and beyond. Many thousands of people had deserted their villages and fled to the forests for safety.

"At last word came to Mr. Sheppard that the Zappo-Zapps had treacherously invited a large number of the prominent chiefs of the region to come inside the stockade, and that there they had been shot down without quarter. The mission then asked Mr. Sheppard, who was also a friend of many of the Zappo-Zapps, to go and carefully investigate the whole affair, taking with him some reliable native men, who could, if necessary, corroborate the statements he made.

"Mr. Sheppard saw along the way several burned villages, also some wounded persons. He reached the well-arranged stockade, and was received in a friendly way by Mlumba Nkusa and his 500 or more followers. Inside the stockade Mr. Sheppard saw and counted eighty one human hands, slowly drying over a fire. Outside the stockade he counted more than two-score bodies piled in a heap. Some of these bodies had the flesh carved from the legs. Upon asking what this meant he was informed by Mlumba Nkusa that his people had eaten the flesh. Mr. Sheppard also saw several Albini rifles and a pistol, with cartridges—all of which natives are forbidden to have. Mlumba Nkusa said plainly that he had been sent by the state officer at Luluaburg and that he had already dispatched to him sixteen slaves."

Mr. Morrison says that no punishment of any kind, save perhaps two or three weeks' imprisonment, was ever meted out to anyone on account of this butchery.

British Consul's Report.

Roger Casement, British consul to the Congo, who has made an extended investigation of conditions as they obtain in that region, has reported the results of his investigation to Lord Lansdowne. The report shows the existence of abuses almost beyond the power of the mind to conceive and of brutalities unimaginable.

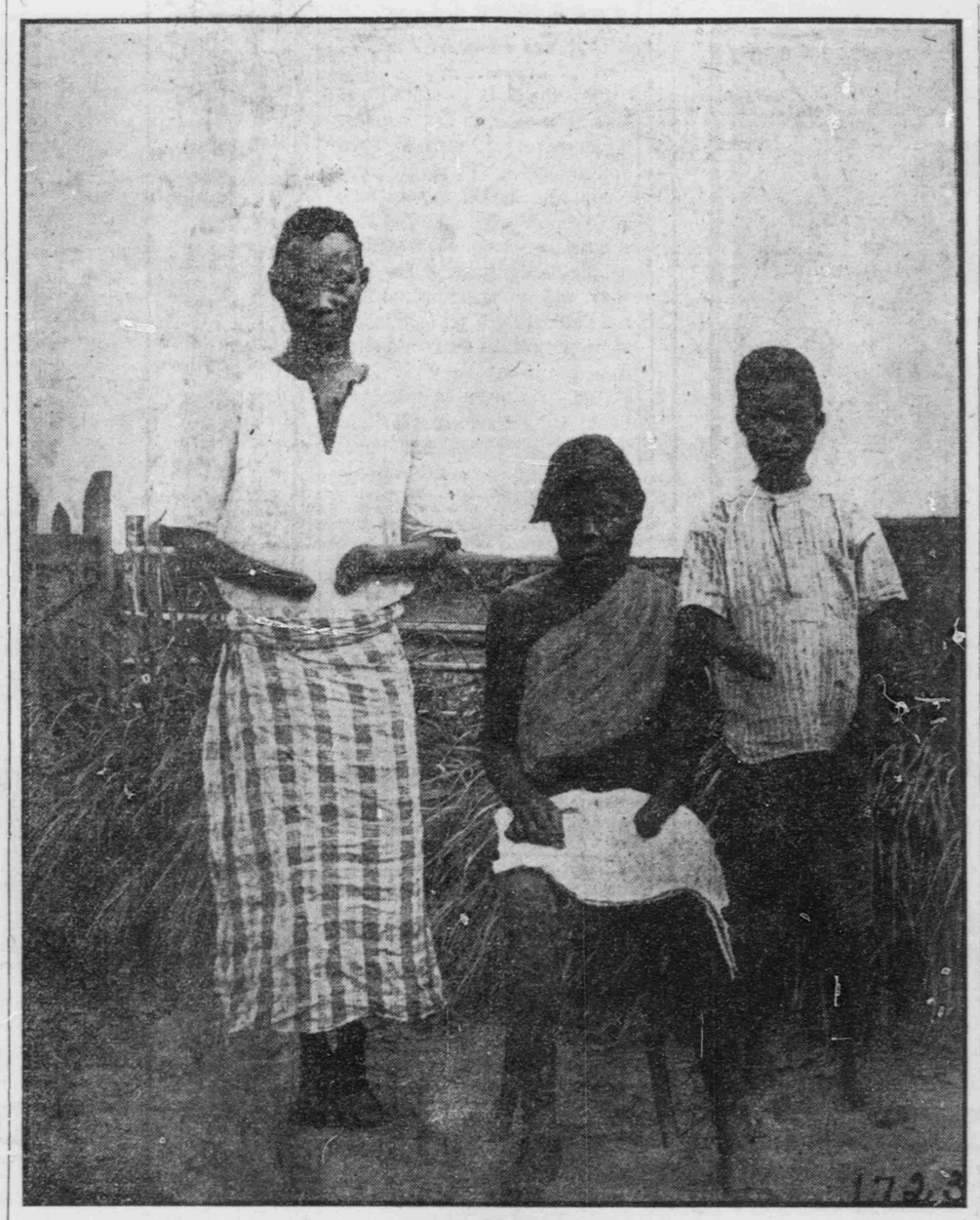
Mr. Casement interrogated a number of the natives who had their hands cut from their arms. In every case these men and women ascribed the mutilation to the ferocity of the village "sentries," who are native soldiers maintained in each of the villages for the purpose of enforcing the gathering of rubber. The consul took the statements of a number of these unhappy persons and of others who claimed to have suffered from the wrath of the soldiers. Here is the statement of a woman described as T T, one of the latter:

"I was born at K K——. After my father died my mother and I went to L L——. When we returned to K K——, soon after that P Q came to fight with us because of rubber. K K—— did not want to take rubber to the white man. We and our mothers ran away very far into the bush. The Bula Matadi soldiers were very strong and they fought hard; one soldier was killed, and they killed one K K—— man. Then the white man said let us go home, and they went home, and then we, too, came out of the bush. This was the first. After that another fighting took place. I, my mother, grandmother, and my sister, we ran away into the bush. The soldiers came and fought us, and left the town and followed us into the bush. When the soldiers came into the bush near us they were calling my mother by name, and I was going to answer, but my mother put her hand to my mouth to stop me. Then they went to another side, and then we left that place and went to another. When they called my mother, if she had not stopped me from answering, we would all have been killed then. A great number of our people were killed by the soldiers. The friends who were left buried the dead bodies, and there was very much weeping.

The Fighting Renewed.

"After that there was not any fighting for some time. Then the soldiers came again to fight with us, and we ran into the bush, but they really came to fight with M M——. They killed a lot of M M—— people, and then one soldier came out to K K——, and the K K—— people killed him with a spear. And when the other soldiers heard that their friend was killed they came in a large number and followed us into the bush. Then the soldiers fired a gun, and some people were killed. After that they saw a little bit of my mother's head, and the soldiers ran quickly toward the place where we were, and caught my grandmother, my mother, my sister, and another little one, younger than us. Several of the soldiers argued about my mother, because each wanted her for a wife, so they finally decided to kill her. They killed her with a gun; they shot her through the stomach, and she fell, and when I saw that I cried very much, because they killed my mother and grandmother, and I was left alone. My mother was near to the time of her confinement at that time. And they killed my grandmother, too, and I saw it all done. They took hold of my sister and asked where her older sister was, and she said: 'She has just run away.' They said, 'Call her.' She called me, but I was too frightened and would not answer, and I ran and went away and came out at another place, and I could not speak much because my throat was very sore.

(Continued on Page Twelve).



VICTIMS OF BRUTALITY OF CONGO RULERS.

Natives whose hands have been severed from their bodies as punishment for their failure to bring in the required amount of rubber.